Research center makes inroads in crawfish farming

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Contributing Writer

Most residents of this area are aware that crawfish are a vital part of the culture and economy of South Louisiana. However, because first-hand knowledge of crawfish usually comes from backyard boils and local festivals, it may surprise most to learn that there is more to crawfish than boudin and étouffée.

USL is home to a center that probes these added dimensions of one of Louisiana’s most popular delicacies. The Crawfish Research Center is devoted to studying the many factors that figure into the production of these tasty crustaceans.

“USL has had a commitment to the crawfish industry and aquaculture industry in the area for quite a while,” said Jay Huner, director of the Crawfish Research Center.

Located near Cade, La., the center has 28 ponds that cover more than 60 of the 600 acres on the USL experimental farm. The center, which has been in operation since 1976, is funded through several state appropriations. These appropriations provide the base salaries for the center’s director and technicians. In addition, it receives grants from several different agencies including the Louisiana Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environmental Quality.

A number of volunteers and adjunct professors operate the center, Huner currently is an adjunct professor of aquaculture at USL and has served as an adjunct professor at the University of Kuopio in Kuopio, Finland. In 1988 he took over the director’s position and also is serving as the president and manager of the Secretariat of the International Association of Astacology, a group dedicated to the study of crawfish.

Work at the research center is carried out year-round, and experiments are performed in a variety of areas including crawfish harvesting, crawfish production, soft-shell crawfish production and crawfish feeds.

Earlier this summer, Huner announced that the research center would join the University of Kuopio in an effort to study a fungal parasite that selectively attacks both the Louisiana red swamp crawfish and the Finnish noble crawfish.

One of the most recent projects at the center involves improving trawling techniques in harvesting crawfish. The procedure requires placing a beam in front of a boat with a pair of trawl nets on either side. This helps to reduce the amount of fish, called by-catch, that get caught in the nets. Knowledge gained from this project is being incorporated on shrimp nets to help reduce by-catch without reducing the amount of shrimp.

“What we have here is a very loose accelerator funnel big enough to allow the turtle to come out but the smaller things, the fish and the shrimp, are pushed straight through to the back of the net,” said Huner.

This new procedure is made possible by utilizing a new type of net material. According to Huner, the new material has a lattice work of openings around the entire circumference of the net. This type of net construction allows the fish to swim out regardless of where they are in the net.

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Huner said that one of the major problems involved with implementing new techniques is that farmers are reluctant to change.

Basically we have systems that we feel are probably cost-effective,” he said. “But at this time, the industry does not seem quite ready to accept it.”

Huner said that by making the new methods cost-effective, farmers will be able to increase production while cutting production costs. But he warns that the consumer should not expect falling production costs to translate into lower prices at the market.

“If we can produce crawfish in a much more effective way, it doesn’t necessarily mean that it will create a lower price for the consumer,” Huner explained. “But it does mean that the farmer may be able to stay in business.”

“Basically, this may not seem related to crawfish, but it is related in the sense that it is taking advantage of personnel at the university to do this kind of work,” he explained.

The netting also is being used to protect crawfish and fish ponds from invader birds.

“A lot of birds can show up — egrets, herons, ibises and so forth,” said Huner. “In some demonstrations we’ve been putting up netting material along the sides to protect the smaller fish and crawfish from birds.”

According to Huner, researchers at the center also helped to design the purging system at Randol’s Restaurant. Purging simply is removing dirt and other contaminants from the crawfish before they are served to the public.

In a related project, Huner and his associates are using Koi carp to clean the purging system. Koi carp are similar in appearance to goldfish, and fully grown Koi carp are quite valuable. They are placed in the purging tanks between crawfish seasons. Therefore, these fish are beneficial in two ways because they clean the

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